

Resumo

Nascido na Arménia, o mais antigo país cristão do mundo e, no entanto, uma jovem república instaurada em 1991 após o colapso da União Soviética, Arshile Gorky fugiu para os Estados Unidos da América em 1920. Na América, Gorky reinventou-se a si mesmo na vontade de se tornar um artista, o que o levou a criar uma *persona* artística com a qual preservou o desenvolvimento do seu génio criador e lhe permitiu sobreviver às memórias traumáticas do Genocídio Arménio (1915-1919). Gorky tornou-se um dos principais defensores da arte moderna europeia que conheceu apenas de visitas a museus e galerias americanos e da leitura de revistas e livros especializados que chegavam aos Estados Unidos. Sob a influência do Surrealismo e, já na década de 1940, através do contacto directo com a natureza, a sua obra foi protagonista de uma extraordinária evolução que abriu portas para toda a dinâmica do Expressionismo Abstracto da Escola de Nova Iorque do pós-II Guerra Mundial. Este artigo propõe um olhar sobre a vida e a obra deste artista arménio-americano que estabeleceu uma fértil ligação entre as suas origens no Medio-Oriente e a sua sonhada Europa, articuladas no trânsito verdadeiramente único da sua criação artística americana. ●

Abstract

Born in Armenia, the oldest Christian country in the world but nevertheless one of the youngest reinstated republics (1991) after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Arshile Gorky flew to the United States in 1920, where he chose to reinvent himself in the struggle to become an artist. This reinvention meant the creation of a *persona* with, or behind, which Gorky kept alive the artistic flame inside himself. Gorky became one of the most learned voices lecturing on contemporary European modernist artists and movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States (New York) without ever visiting Europe. Moreover, he was able to survive the traumatic events he underwent during the Armenian Genocide (1915-1919) to adapt to his new country and identity, to live through the years of the Depression and, eventually, to become the protagonist of a major artistic breakthrough. This paper proposes an insight into the experience of life and frame of work of this Armenian-American artist, whose simultaneously rich, traumatic, dislocated and reenacted life and work established one of the most fertile links between his middle-eastern origins, his dreamed of Europe and the particular transit of his American artistic creation. ●

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ARSHILE GORKY, AN ARMENIAN IN NEW YORK

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"I shall be a great artist or if not, a great crook."

Arshile Gorky¹

1. Arrival: Ellis Island and the American Dream

On 1 March, 1920, sixteen year old Vosdanig (Manouk) Adoian and his fourteen year old sister Vartoosh arrived on Ellis Island, New York, among thousands of Armenian refugees. They were welcomed by their older sister Akabi who took them to Watertown, Massachusetts, where Akabi managed a hostel. They then travelled to Providence, where their father and older brother lived, working in a factory that produced iron parts for machinery for textile industry machinery. Vosdanig and Vartoosh were supposed to learn English and finish their few years of study in Armenia. In the school year of 1920-1921, Gorky enrolled in two schools for general education but in the end he quit school and went to live with Akabi and began working for Hood Rubber Company, a factory in Watertown. He hated the job and tolerated it for only a few months because he wanted to become a painter. He used to draw in his work breaks, using the materials meant for packaging factory products and forgetting to return to work. Akabi and Vartoosh supported their brother's resolve. Akabi gave him canvases and paint but, besides this, the incentives from Gorky's exiled family were few.

¹ Spender, 2000:64.

Nevertheless, in the school year of 1922-1923, Gorky enrolled in Boston's New School of Design. He had already attended another art school briefly in Boston, the Scott Carbee School. In a 1946 letter to Gorky, one colleague from the latter institution described the incidents that led to his parting from the school director: *"One day we had a very young girl model, you worked feverishly on your oil painting, you caught the childlike character and soul on your canvas – Carbee did not come near you until the end of the class and then he punished you and told you if you couldn't paint the way he wanted you to you didn't need to come to his classes – you calmly took the canvas and smashed it all to hell, packed your paints & left – I never remember seeing you at the classes again."* (Spender, 2000:62).

It was in these anonymous years that Gorky developed into a deeply idiosyncratic young artist with a cultivated image somewhere between the bohemian and the eccentric. Gorky's life in this period is not very well known; he probably lived alone in Boston earning some money from casual work. Gorky, who even in the worst years of the Depression wore a full suit, used a long cape that accentuated his unmistakable tall and slim silhouette. He reacted violently against those who tried

Gorky painting at his sister Akabi's house in Watertown, c. 1923
Unknown photographer, Coll. Maro Gorky, gift of Gail Sarkissian
Courtesy the Arshile Gorky Foundation



² After the First World War massacres, Gorki joined the Armenian Relief Organisation and co-edited the first anthology of Armenian poetry. He was also the author of several famous novels, namely *Mother*, published in 1907 (NY, D. Appleton and Co.).

³ Untitled *Arshile Gorky* it was published in 1957 by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, with an introduction by Meyer Schapiro.

to restrain his artistic freedom. In Spender's words, "*As if to burn bridges behind him, Gorky assumed the pose of the most flamboyant artist he could imagine*" (2000: 59). By changing his name and nationality, he was trying to assert himself as an artist, to free himself from the stigma carried by the thousands of Armenian refugees known as *starving Armenians* and not very well regarded socially.

Gorky admired the Russians. He had many Russian friends, among them Mischa Reznikoff, a young Ukrainian art student who encouraged him to follow a career as an artist. Towards the end of the 1920s, after his move to New York in 1925, he became friend with a group of Russian immigrant artists such as Raphael Soyer, Nicholas Vasilieff, David Burliuk and John Graham. He therefore took Russian nationality, adopting the first name Arshel, meaning "cursed" (he would change it to Arshile at the beginning of the 1930s), and the last name Gorky, which in Russian means "bitter". He claimed to be a nephew (or cousin) of the already famous Russian writer Maxim Gorki² whose real name was Alexei Maximovitch Pechkov. He did not seem to be bothered by the fact that he was actually establishing a family link with the writer's pen name, nor was he embarrassed when people asked him about Gorki's health condition or when one of the writer's friends confessed to be surprised to meet an unknown nephew of the writer in New York. As the artist's most recent biographer, Hayden Herrera, notes "*For Gorky, youthful fakery was one element in the crucible of self-invention. With time he would fill out and even burst beyond the disguises he assumed.*" (2003:125).

2. The Crusade of Self-invention

One of the first known paintings signed 'Arshel Gorky' dates back to 1924, it is an urban landscape portraying Park Street church, near his Boston art school. After only one year at the school, it was clear that Gorky had good artistic skills. According to one of his teachers, "*he came very well equipped in drawing. He liked the truth and wanted to do an honest job and loved beautiful things. He was determined to be an artist.*" (Spender, 2000:64). He was, therefore, invited to help open a New York branch of the school working as a monitor for the classical model class. In September 1926, he became the teacher of the still life class and of the model painting and drawing class. Mark Rothko, who had arrived in the United States in 1913 and still called himself Rothkowitz, was one of Gorky's students at that new school. Gorky was a determined young teacher, perhaps a little too strict and determined for Rothko's taste. He recalls the dreamy and evasive way in which Gorky told stories of his childhood, "*the unique beauties and poetry of the place*", mixing reality and fiction with great poetic imagination (Herrera, 2003:130).

As in Boston, Gorky was a regular visitor to New York's museums and exhibitions. He was also an avid reader. Based on the biography written by Ethel Schwabacher, Gorky's student and his first biographer³ Harold Rosenberg portrays Gorky as an

intellectual artist: “he lived in an aura of words and concepts, almost as much at home in the library as in the museum and gallery” (1962:14). Apparently Gorky always carried with him books about the works of the great masters, memorizing the shapes of the art works in the same way others memorized verses of certain poems. Meyer Schapiro called Gorky a “fervent scrutinizer” of paintings, and it was certainly a crucial element of Gorky’s self-teaching: the ability to look at art and pick out the fundamental aspects in the works of the masters.

In the first years of the 1930s, Willem de Kooning was very close to Gorky, enjoying and sharing the latter’s great knowledge and passion for art, and accompanying him on many visits to exhibitions. “Gorky was the essential alchemist in de Kooning’s early life” (Stevens & Swan, 2004:101). However, de Kooning was never able to truly explain the mystery surrounding his friend: “I had some training in Holland, quite a training, you know, the Academy. Gorky didn’t have that at all. He came from no place. He came here when he was sixteen, from Tbilisi in Georgia, with an Armenian upbringing. And for some mysterious reason, he knew lots more about painting, and art – he just knew it by nature – things I was supposed to know and feel and understand – he really did it better. He had an extraordinary gift for hitting the nail on the head.” (Stevens & Swan, 2004:101).

On 15 September 1926, an article in the *New York Evening Post* presented the artist at the start of his teaching career at the Grand Central School of Art, founded two years earlier and since then having attracted some 900 students. This article gave Gorky some exposure referring to him as a 23 year old Russian painter fathered by the city of New York: “The election of Mr. Gorky to the art school faculty gives New York indefinitely, perhaps permanently, a member of one of Russia’s greatest artist families, for he is a cousin of the famous writer, Maxim Gorky. But Arshele Gorky’s heart and soul are still his own.” (quoted in Rosenberg, 1962:123). Gorky was portrayed as a young and talented artist able to cope with the city frenzy and, although newly arrived, capable of identifying the main flaws in the relationship of America and the Americans with contemporary art: an excessive taste for antiques, a preference for famous names and for whatever was in fashion (Rosenberg, 1962:124-5).

The emphasis of the *New York Evening Post* article on the free spirit of Gorky’s heart and soul would later gain some significance when set against those who thought that he lacked originality, was too eclectic and attached to the work of great masters such as Ingres, Cézanne, Matisse and, above all, Picasso. Gorky’s learning process followed a very specific and traditional model in which the disciple copies the work of the master until he is able to unravel its secrets. It is possible that Gorky became acquainted with this model in Armenia, which was also used in ancient art workshops and guilds. Within a history of twentieth century art devoted to the originality of the artist this working-learning process was the source of a lot of misunderstandings about the pertinence of the development of his work considered to be redeemed only in the final years (1942-1948), when Gorky “found” his own artistic expression. Published in 1962, Rosenberg’s already quoted study,



Untitled (Virginia Landscape), (1943)
Graphite and wax crayon on paper, 52,7x70.3cm
© 2015 The Arshile Gorky Foundation / Artist
Rights Society (ARS), New York

tried to give a new meaning to this misconception by stating that Gorky's desiring of originality, one of the most central notions in modern art, was itself a sign of his originality. When Gorky painted in the manner of some of his favourite masters, a choice that displayed a surprising knowledge and a truly enlightened intuition of ancient and contemporary European art, his work was not an imitation, but rather a revelation of certain aspects that interested him in those works. His outstanding technique made the final result considerably different. However, Rosenberg took a further step by defining Gorky's practical learning process as a process of "acculturation". When he copied a painting by Picasso he was accessing the work of other artists, schools and periods in which Picasso was himself interested. Rosenberg did capture very well the significance of that learning process in the development of Gorky's artistic career. It did not function as a great preliminary period of imitation, but rather as an active period of work, a great effort to understand different artistic processes, which sometimes resulted in paintings very close to those of the masters he was most interested in: *"Gorky copies Picasso, who parodies Ingres, who was engaged in hiding something. The artist's masquerade resembles that of art itself, in which a constructed image, to begin with a 'copy of nature', keeps reappearing for centuries in a succession of metamorphoses. Gorky's act of labelling himself with another man's device lies at the root of his processes as a painter and the metaphorical art that blossomed out of them."* (Rosenberg, 1962:44).

In the 1980s, the systematic research carried out by Melvin P. Lader on the huge number of Gorky's drawings, allowed a better understanding of his creative process. Lader had access to several issues of the *The Arts* magazine of the 1920s, studied by Gorky and containing his annotations. He realised that in the illustrations of the great masters' works Gorky isolated the graphical aspects that most interested him. Once taken from their context, these shapes became abstract. On the other hand, Gorky also learnt from studying cubist compositions the importance of "negative space", the space untouched by the represented element (which occupies the positive space) or, in other words, all the empty spaces around the represented elements. *"Abstracting from other sources, whether they be artistic, natural, or man-made objects, was absolutely central to Gorky's thinking, and viewing form as a combination of both positive and negative space was, of course, consistent with modern artistic theory. The fact that he often discovered such use of space and form in the works of others attests to his unrivalled knowledge of art history."* (Lader, 2003:17).

Lader fully integrated the phase that Rosenberg labelled as constructive learning in the development process of Gorky's artistic career and also opposed the division of the artist's career into three different decades of work (the 1920s, the 1930s and the 1940s). He also contributed to an understanding of Gorky's relationship with the history of art, a relationship in which considerations regarding theme or chronology were never valued, rather the formal characteristics in the works of several artists that Gorky regarded as essential to the development of modern styles. Gorky's studies also had an important pedagogical side because he deciphered

aspects of the works' compositions and techniques together with his students. The artist demonstrated a truly surprising knowledge of these masters' works and of the techniques they used. He was aware of and discussed the work of Cézanne or the analytical and synthetic phases of Cubism at a time when these issues were not systematically discussed nor deserved the curiosity of American artists. It was therefore inevitable that his curriculum vitae would include a few years of study in Paris. Gorky presented himself as an avant-garde artist from the School of Paris, claiming to have studied at the Académie Julian or under the supervision of Kandinsky, in 1920 (Lader, 1985: 19).

3. Critical fortune

After the publication at the turn of the twentieth-first century of three biographies on Gorky that successfully established a broader understanding of the artist's life and creative context⁴ the retrospective exhibition, held by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2009, with its comprehensive catalogue⁵ has established the most up-to-date research on the artist. These publications have been further complemented by the essay written by Matthew Gale and by the book published by Kim S. Theriault.⁶ In France, within the commemorations of Year of Armenia in 2007, an exhibition⁷ was organized drawing public attention to Arshile Gorky, an artist well known to Breton and Duchamp – who invited him to participate in the 1947 Surrealist exhibition in Paris, the first major artistic event in France after the Second World War, and who had had a big influence on the revitalization of the “Shipwrecked Surrealism” when some of its better-known figures took refuge in the USA after 1940. Therefore, and in contrast to the heavy silence that fell upon Gorky's work in the fifty years immediately following his death in 1948, there has recently been a strong renewal of interest in his *oeuvre* and life. Gorky's work has been better understood and evaluated in the light of a much more “open” history of art, an interdisciplinary history of art which takes into consideration many different aspects regarding the interaction between artists, their social and cultural contexts and the manifold influences that build up different creative manifestations. In this regard, Gorky is a perfect character because he stands between culture – Homi Bhaba's *in-between state* that Kim Theriault acknowledges as Gorky's own “interstitial spatiality” both socially and privately: “Gorky was, in fact, as an outsider in a new place, always somewhat in-between – public and private, past and present, psyche and social – and reluctant to pin himself down (...).” (Theriault, 2009: 46). Gorky's *persona* and life adventure, linking the Middle East to the United States – with a strong imaginary interlude into the European avant-garde which he only saw and studied in America – has definitely caught the public's imagination and the interest of many scholars and curators. There has also been a big effort in establishing Gorky's corpus of work and personal documentation, especially in relation to a set of letters written in Armenian

⁴ Nouritza Matossian, *Black Angel: A Life of Arshile Gorky*, 1998; Matthew Spender *From a High Place: A Life of Arshile Gorky*, 1999; Hayden Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work*, 2003.

⁵ Michael R. Taylor (ed.), *Arshile Gorky. A Retrospective*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009.

⁶ Matthew Gale, *Arshile Gorky. Enigma and Nostalgia*, Tate Publishing, 2010 (published when the Philadelphia exhibition was shown in London at the Tate Modern from 10 February to 3 May 2010. Kim S. Theriault, *Rethinking Arshile Gorky*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.

⁷ The exhibition held at the Centre Georges Pompidou and at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Paris was called *Hommage Arshile Gorky*. On this occasion a catalogue was published, the present article being a rearrangement of my text “Arshile Gorky ou l'impératif de la peinture” for this catalogue (Éditions du Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2007). On this occasion the newspaper *Le Monde* published an article by Phillip Dagen asking for a full retrospective of Gorky's work in France, something that has not occurred to the present date.

⁸ It should be pointed out that in Gorky's first published biography by Nouritza Matossian the question of the fake letters had already been raised and partially corrected. Matthew Spender's undated edition *Goats on the Roof. A life in letters and documents* (London: Ridinghouse) establishes 50 letters in Armenian that were sent by Gorky to Vartoosh.

⁹ Robert Gulbenkian was nephew of Calouste Gulbenkian and former director and trustee of the Armenian Communities Department of the Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon.

¹⁰ In 1984, Karlen Mooradian organised an exhibition in Lisbon of his and his mother's collection of Gorky's works, with a catalogue fully written by Karlen. This exhibition then travelled to the Gulbenkian in Paris to be presented in January 1985 at avenue d'Iéna, the Parisian house of Mr. Gulbenkian

that have been discarded as false. The publication of Gorky's letters and documents⁸ has been a major contribution in developing a better understanding of this intriguing and outstanding artist. Even if Gorky's Armenian origin and background is undeniable – as Father Krikor Maksoudian writes '*Gorky (...) did not have any problem writing his letters in Armenian. His idiomatic use of the Armenian language in expressing his feelings and thoughts leave no doubt that he thought in Armenian.*' (Spender (ed.), undated: 425) – there have been some misconceptions regarding his relationship to his motherland to which he never returned. His sentimental and 'patriotic' Armenian approach was promoted by Karlen Mooradian (Gorky's nephew, Vartoosh only son) who became an Armenian scholar and used Gorky's artistic reputation to speak about his uncle's country: "*Much of his research is valuable, but his fabrication of primary sources to substantiate his view of Gorky as a great Armenian patriot has caused endless confusion.*" (idem: 487). Karlen Mooradian's acquaintance with Robert Gulbenkian⁹ and the Armenian background and continuous work with the Armenia Diaspora of the Gulbenkian Foundation was the fundamental reason why this Foundation exhibited Gorky's work in the 1980s¹⁰ and has incorporated three of his works in its Modern Art Centre art collection, holding fifty more in a deposit from the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern). Since 1985, the Gulbenkian Foundation has promoted Gorky's artworks, exhibiting them whenever possible amongst his collection and temporary exhibitions programme and securing its loan to international temporary exhibitions. In connection with the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 2015, the Gulbenkian Foundation promoted a week of events in November 2014, which will be held on a yearly basis from this date forward, on Armenian culture in order to bring this extraordinary multi-secular historical land and its people closer to the public.

4. Departure: Gorky's dreamed-of Armenia

Among the several researchers of Gorky's life and work it is commonly stated that he postponed the memory of Armenia, not forgetting his past life but placing it in parentheses, in some kind of memory pocket that was hard for him to open. According to Spender "*So much had been destroyed. It was impossible to come to terms with the loss. An act of nonremembering, which was not forgetfulness but postponement of thought, was the only response. It was perhaps for this reason that Gorky reacted so aggressively if ever anyone questioned the tall tales with which he later camouflaged the past. Explanations, justifications, dialogue of any kind would have required a mental effort that he could not make without bringing down a whole world of real experience tumbling about his head.*" (Spender, 2000:49).

Such postponement, in waiting for artistic and personal circumstances that would enable him to revisit memories, became the main explanation for the explosion of creativity displayed in his 1940s works, namely those dating between 1942 and 1948.

This outburst of creativity has been rightfully related with Gorky's marriage to Agnes Magruder, whom he always called Mougouch¹¹ and, above all, to the fertile working periods spent in the countryside: at Mougouch's parents farm in Virginia (Crooked Run Farm where he spent periods in 1941 and 1943), at Saul Schary's farm in Connecticut (a three week period in 1942) and, from September 1945 on, at Henry's Hebbeln remodelled farmhouse in Sherman, Connecticut.

Curiously enough, in 1942 as part of artist's contribution to the war effort, Gorky set up a course in camouflage at the Grand Central School of Art. The course programme allows us to peep into Gorky's thoughts about himself and his work considering camouflage as a natural disguise which must have been very familiar to his daily routine: *"To confuse and paralyze the enemy vision is the role of camouflage. (...) In the study of the object, as a thing seen, [the artist] has acquired a profound understanding and sensibility concerning its visual aspects. The philosophy as well as the physical and psychological laws governing their relationships constitutes the primary source material for the study of camouflage. The mastery of this visual intelligence has been the particular domain of the modern artist."* (Spender (ed.), undated: 188). The text then follows explaining how Cubist painters, more than any other, understood the governing laws of the visible world establishing its visual premises for architecture and design, and acknowledging the importance of the "different branches of modern art" which "through exhaustive experiment and research" created a "vast laboratory whose discoveries unveiled for all the secrets of form, line and color". Perhaps more important is the half-sentence stating "Arshile Gorky, himself a product of this period and a modern painter of considerable reputation..." (*ibidem*, my emphasis) as it clearly reinstates the wonderfully close link – fully recognised by De Kooning in the previously quoted famous statement about Gorky – that united Gorky to modernity and to the practise of an instinctively, although thoroughly studied and debated, modernist representational theory. This can be seen as the core of Gorky's fragmented personality that in fact, has made him completely predisposed to fully understand and perform as his own modernist representational premise both formally and conceptually.

Inevitably however, underneath and simultaneously with his somewhat brilliant self-camouflage, Gorky's inner self was kept very much alive, obviously as a condition of his extraordinary creativity. What may have been a continuous flow, keeps surfacing in different moments that are not necessarily exclusively linked with Surrealistic practices. Some of the titles of several paintings and drawings from 1938 on refer to places and rituals of his motherland: *Garden in Sochi* or *Garden of Wish Fulfilment*. Others are of a poetic autobiographical nature, such as the extraordinary *How my Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life* or the more prosaic *Scent of Apricots on the Fields* or *Water of the Flowery Mill*. Others have a

¹¹ This nickname being 'an affectionate Armenian version of the Russian adjective meaning 'powerful'" (Spender (ed.), undated: 488).



Gorky drawing in a field at Crooked Run Farm, Virginia, summer 1944.
Photograph by Agnes Magruder. Courtesy the Arshile Gorky Foundation.

strong Surrealist poetic flavour such as *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*, or *The Leaf of the Artichoke is an Owl*. Gorky's titles struck by their poetic and rather sincere nature for someone who apparently always felt the need to negotiate some kind of disguise in his relation towards other people.

Achieving artistic maturity, Gorky was certainly able to draw from his old, probably confused, certainly traumatic memories, and bring forth into his art what they conveyed. He did this almost poetic capturing of his past mainly within the creative frame of Surrealism, which he followed regularly since its first echoes in New York with the publication of *Cahiers d'Art* from 1926 onward. Some of the surrealist features, namely the automatism, were only achieved in the early 1940s, and

these technical requirements were very important in the creation of his particular abstract vocabulary.

However, as already pointed out, his returning to Armenian memories and to his personal loss was a deeply rooted impulse that remained with him throughout his life. This can be ascertained by the painting begun in 1926: a double portrait entitled *The Artist and His Mother*. It is a painting that has two versions (one dated 1926-1936, presently at the Whitney Museum for American Art¹² and a second one dated c. 1926-c.1942 belonging to the National Gallery of Art, Washington). These paintings, or rather this image differently painted in two versions, was executed from a photograph of himself and his mother taken in Van in 1912, which was to be sent to his father in the United States. Gorky found the photograph at his father's house and he treasured its possession very much. It is said to be one of the few things he saved from the fire in 1946 when his studio was burnt along with many of his works amounting to more than 20 paintings and a year and half's worth of drawings (Spender, 2000:29). The painting is a long artistic and obviously emotional negotiation with the traumatic disappearance of his mother, his homeland, his childhood and almost himself. Its monumental evocative power makes it an overwhelming image, even for those unfamiliar with Gorky's work.

Over time these two paintings became a powerful symbol of the 1915 Armenian genocide. *"Armenians of the Diaspora recognize in these works degrees of suffering about which those who are not Armenian know nothing. Though most Armenians with whom I have talked have their difficulties with Gorky's abstract work, the two versions of The Artist and His Mother evoke immediate recognition. Or even more: the implication that non-Armenians have no claim over this image. As does no other work by an Armenian artist, it bears witness to the genocide of 1915."* (Spender, 2000:182). It is possible to evoke the genocide once we know about the dramatic events that took place after the photograph was taken and that are somehow hinted at in the photograph itself: the family's escape from Van to Etchmiazin and then to Yerevan, Shushanik der Marderosian and her children's unsuccessful attempt to reach Tbilisi, the forced return to Yerevan where in March 1918 Shushan would eventually die of starvation and exhaustion in the arms of Gorky and Vartoosh, and finally the siblings' escape to the United States. The iconic character of this painting was deliberately sought by the artist, and is common to other portraits that Gorky made of his sisters during these same years. This iconic aspect is similar to that of ancient Byzantine and medieval paintings, underlined by the composition's hieratic nature, deliberately made flat in a strict assertion of the canvas's two-dimensionality (something in which Gorky took a profound interest having studied in great detail the work of Paolo Ucello¹³). The iconic value of the painting is also stressed by the significance of the polished surface, something that we also find in his other portraits (Gorky used a razor in order to achieve this uniform appearance of the painted surface¹⁴).

In a more formal sense, we can regard it, like Rosenberg did, as an attempt to create a masterpiece, a desire he shared with De Kooning. Its importance in Gorky's artistic

¹² It actually belongs to Gorky's daughters, Maro and Natasha, as a present from Julien Levy in memory of their father.

¹³ Here as well as in other aspects of his work Gorky was greatly influenced by John Graham (Kiev, 1886-?, 1961): "A canvas was 'a two dimensional proposition'. Any hint at three-dimensional 'illusionism' was to be avoided. 'Perfect two-dimensional form speaks of objects' three-dimensionality better, more fully and more poignantly than shadow painting possibly can'. To add shadows to shapes was to 'conceal shape rather than elucidate it'." (quoted by Spender, 2000:94).

¹⁴ “This picture took a hell of a long time. He’d let it dry good and hard. Then he’d take it into the bathroom and he’d scrape the paint down with a razor over the surface, very carefully until it got as smooth as if it were painted on ivory. You look at the picture and you won’t be able to tell how he did it because there are no brushstrokes. Then he’d go back and paint it again, all very fine and done with very soft camel-haired brushes. He scraped it and he scraped it and he scraped it. Then he’d hold it over the bathtub and wipe off with a damp rag all the excess dust and paint that he’d scraped off. That’s how he got that wonderful surface. It’s the only painting he ever did that way.” (Saul Schary apud Matossian, 1998:217).

career has recently been stressed, either in the Philadelphia exhibition and catalogue (it is the image chosen for its cover) or in the studies published by Matthew Gale and by Kim Theriault, emphasising the different character of both paintings. Gorky never lost the sense of belonging to an extraordinarily ancient and rich culture, a founding world culture, which had almost no point of contact with what he saw and learnt in the United States and from western culture. He did receive, however, a lot from western culture and from the American way of life, being himself a self-made man, although his career path to success was not achieved. The open crisis of his last years, a succession of incidents that finally broke down his resistance – his studio fire, a terrible cancer, a car crash causing the incapacity of his right arm – suggest the closure of a fearful circle which was however opposed by what he accomplished for perpetuity: a family and an artistic oeuvre that continually fascinates and slowly unravels its mysteries. ●

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